

Human Resources Division

B-226484

February 10, 1989

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable William H. Natcher
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives



This briefing report responds to your subcommittees' request that we obtain the current views of Social Security Administration (SSA) personnel on the quality of SSA's service to the public and the impact of staff reductions. You also asked us to compare those views to those expressed by SSA personnel during a GAO survey made 2 years ago. As agreed with your offices, we also asked SSA personnel to comment on morale, unit performance, and the effect on service of two recent SSA initiatives—offering appointments to persons who need to visit a local office and taking claims over the telephone (teleclaims).

This report is based on responses to questionnaires mailed in June 1988 to a sample of 467 managers and 643 employees in SSA's district and branch offices (field offices) and hearing offices. About 88 percent of those sampled responded. The results of our review, which are discussed in more detail in the appendixes to this report, can be summarized briefly as follows:

- The percentages of field office managers and employees who perceived a decline in SSA service, performance, and morale increased since 1986 (pp. 9 and 13).
- The principal reason cited for the decline was staff reductions, which are expected to continue through fiscal year 1990 (pp. 9 and 13).
- While service quality in general is perceived as declining, most field office managers and employees viewed the current quality of many specific services as "good" or "very good." Respondents cited courtesy, clarity of explanations given to clients, and thoroughness in developing claims as examples (p. 21).

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- In contrast to field offices, the performance of SSA's hearing offices is much better, according to the chief administrative law judges and their employees (p. 19).
- Field office managers and employees viewed SSA's teleclaim and appointment initiatives favorably because they provide additional service options for the public and promote efficiency (p. 23).

The views of SSA employees and managers provide one important perspective on the quality of service issue. Other perspectives include those of SSA clients and SSA's own statistical performance measures. With respect to client perceptions, two GAO surveys (as well as surveys by others) show that clients are generally satisfied with SSA service.¹ Similarly, SSA performance indicators—which have been routinely reported to your Committees—generally indicate stable performance by SSA over the last several years.

SSA is aware that the morale of managers and employees has been low and that they are dissatisfied with the staff reduction initiative. To address employee concerns and solicit managers' views about how best to manage during this period of staff reductions and in the future, SSA recently held "management forums" in each of its 10 regions and 6 program service centers and with headquarters staff in Baltimore. At these meetings, Commissioner Dorcas Hardy and senior officials addressed the groups to explain her agenda and to solicit managers' input on improving SSA's operations and work environment. The forums were attended by approximately 10,000 SSA managers.

What effect the management forum initiative (and others) will have on service quality and employee morale is hard to predict. Further, SSA's staff reduction program will complicate improvement of employee morale—at least over the next 2 years. As mentioned earlier, staff reductions were the most frequently cited reason for poor morale within the agency.

We will provide your Committees with another report in May 1989 on the status of SSA staff cuts and service quality. As you requested, that report will include information on employee morale in other federal agencies, which in general is reported to have declined in recent years.

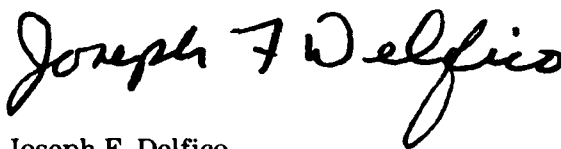
¹Social Security: Quality of Service Generally Rated High by Clients Sampled (GAO/HRD-86-8, Jan. 30, 1986).

Social Security: Clients Still Rate Quality of Service High, (GAO/HRD-87-103BR, July 14, 1987).

This information should be useful in assessing SSA morale problems in a broader context.

As requested, we did not obtain written comments from SSA about the matters discussed in this report because to do so would have delayed its issuance. However, we discussed the report's contents with SSA officials and incorporated their comments where appropriate. As arranged with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this briefing report until 5 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to other congressional committees and members, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the Commissioner of Social Security, and other interested parties. We also will make copies available to others upon request.

The major contributors to this briefing report are listed in appendix VII.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Joseph F. Delfico". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joseph F. Delfico
Senior Associate Director

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Abbreviations

ALJ	administrative law judge
GAO	General Accounting Office
SSA	Social Security Administration

Background, Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Background

Social security touches the lives of nearly everyone in the United States. Through its largest program—Retirement and Survivors Insurance—the Social Security Administration (SSA) in fiscal year 1988 paid approximately \$192 billion in benefits to about 34.6 million people. For many people, SSA represents their primary contact with the federal government and often involves matters crucial to their well-being.

To provide access for its clients, SSA has established a vast service network. Approximately 1,300 district and branch offices (field offices) located throughout the country provide a wide range of services, from taking claims from clients for benefits to answering various questions about social security programs. Also, SSA has about 132 hearing offices, which process appeals of SSA claims decisions.

In 1985, SSA announced its intention to reduce staff by 17,000, or 21 percent, by fiscal year 1990. Concerned that the staff reduction plan might impair SSA's capabilities, the Congress requested that SSA periodically report to it on service quality. Also, GAO has issued a series of reports on service quality, as has the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General.

SSA is in the fifth year of its 6-year staff reduction plan. Through fiscal year 1988, SSA had reduced its staff by about 13,100, or about 77 percent of target. For fiscal year 1989, SSA currently plans a reduction of about 1,800, leaving a reduction of 2,100 staff to be realized in fiscal year 1990.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Our objectives were to obtain the views of SSA personnel on (1) the quality of service, impact of staff reductions, unit performance, and morale and compare those views with the results of a survey we administered 2 years earlier; (2) the current quality of specific services, such as client waiting time and telephone access; and (3) the effect of recent SSA initiatives—appointments and teleclaims—on service.

To accomplish our objectives, we surveyed three groups of SSA personnel: (1) a sample of managers and selected employees of SSA's 1,300 field offices; (2) all of SSA's area managers, each of whom on average oversees the operations of about 17 field offices; and (3) all of SSA's chief administrative law judges (ALJs) and a sample of employees in their offices. These personnel were selected because they generally have first-hand knowledge of the quality of service provided to the public. In total, the

personnel in the above offices constitute about two-thirds of all SSA personnel.

To obtain the views of SSA personnel, we developed two questionnaires—one for managers and the other for their employees. The questionnaires were pretested in the Baltimore area and Camden and Trenton, New Jersey. We also provided copies of the draft questionnaires to SSA headquarters officials for review. To ensure a high rate of response, we promised the respondents that all answers would be held in strict confidence and no individual identified.

We mailed the questionnaires in June 1988 and conducted follow-up mailings in July and August 1988. Respondents were telephoned concerning answers that were incomplete or inconsistent. Our sampling plan was designed to provide a sampling error for individual estimates no greater than plus or minus 5 percent at a 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Our initial sample for SSA managers totaled 490. This included a simple random sample of 293 district and branch office managers representing a total of about 1,300 field offices; the 70 area managers who have management oversight over the field offices; and the 127 chief ALJs responsible for the management of field Offices of Hearings and Appeals.

We adjusted the original sample of managers to account for those who had either died, retired, left SSA, or had less than 1 year of management experience. The adjusted sample for managers was 467; 414, or 89 percent, responded by our closing date of September 16, 1988 (see table I.1 for breakdown by component).

Table I.1: Number and Response Rate of Managers Who Responded, by Organizational Component (1988)

	Number	Rate (percent)
District and branch offices	258	91
Area offices	64	93
Field Offices of Hearings and Appeals	92	81
Total/average	414	89

Our initial sample of employees totaled 677; after various adjustments, this was reduced to 643. The sample taken was a stratified random sample from three job series comprising most of the employees directly engaged in providing service to the public: (1) claims representatives, (2) service representatives, and (3) hearings assistants and clerks within

the field Offices of Hearings and Appeals. A total of 568 employees, or 88 percent, responded to our questionnaire (see table I.2 for a breakdown by component).

**Table I.2: Number and Response Rate of
SSA Employees Who Responded, by
Organizational Component (1988)**

	Number	Rate (percent)
District and branch offices	310	89
Field Offices of Hearings and Appeals	258	87
Total/average	568	88

We compared the responses to our current survey with the responses to a 1986 survey made in connection with our assessment of the quality of SSA management. Our 1986 survey solicited the views of SSA personnel on a broad spectrum of management issues (e.g., organizational environment, planning, budgeting, and training and development). The results were used in our report, Social Security Administration: Stable Leadership and Better Management Needed to Improve Effectiveness (GAO/HRD-87-39, Mar. 18, 1987). Also, we reported the survey results separately in a staff study, Social Security Administration: Questionnaire Responses From Mid-Level Managers and Employees (GAO/HRD-87-72, July 1, 1987).

For selected questions asked of field office managers and employees, we compared responses between 1986 and 1988 to determine whether the differences were statistically significant. A significant difference means that the change was not attributable just to random sample variability.

Our review was conducted from February to October 1988 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Views of Field Office Managers and Employees

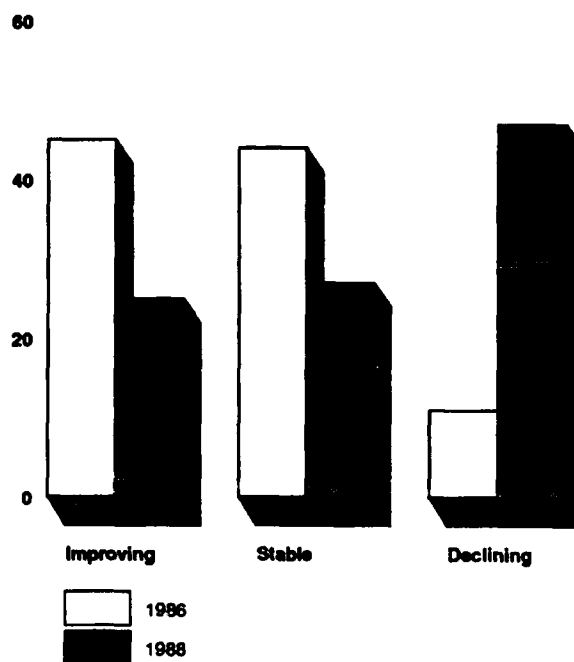
Quality of Service and Job Performance

Compared with 1986, a significant number of SSA district and branch office managers and employees perceived a decline in SSA's service to the public and unit performance. The staff reduction plan was cited by SSA managers and employees as the primary factor for the decline.

Managers

According to field office managers, over the past 2 years their offices' performance in providing quality service to the public has declined significantly, shifting from an improving or stable condition (see fig. II.1). The percentage of managers who rated their unit's performance as declining quadrupled since 1986—from 11 to 47 percent (a statistically significant difference).

Figure II.1: Field Office Managers' Ratings of Office Performance (1986, 1988)



Asked to rate the extent to which eight factors contributed to declining performance, the managers cited two—staff reductions and low staff morale—as principal reasons (see table II.1).

But field office managers who currently viewed their office's performance as stable or improving (52 percent) most frequently cited better management controls, teleclaims, appointments, and automation as reasons for this performance. Appointments and teleclaims are discussed in detail in appendix VI. Reasons cited less frequently include increased award money and reduced volume of work.

Table II.1: Field Office Managers' Reasons for Decline in Units' Performance (1986, 1988)

Reason	Percent of respondents citing reason ^a	
	1986	1988
Reduced staff	86	91
Decline in staff morale	71	78
Revised operating procedures	58	54
Increased workload	68	48
New laws/executive orders	59	32
Reorganization/consolidation	14	14

^aThe data represent the frequency to which the reasons listed caused a decline in performance to a moderate, great, or very great extent.

In response to two additional questions we asked, many managers said that the staff cuts had had a negative effect on their ability to operate their offices. We asked managers to rate the extent to which 10 specific problems hindered their ability to accomplish the mission of their office. The problems listed, common in large organizations, included poor coordination and communication, frequent organizational changes, unclear authority, and excessive levels of review. The problem SSA managers identified most frequently was the insufficient allocation of staff resources to accomplish stated objectives. About 51 percent of the managers said this hindered their ability to manage to a great or very great extent. In 1986, only 31 percent of the managers responded in like manner. The increase of 20 percent is a statistically significant difference.

The other question concerned the managers' views on the effect of staff cuts on their offices' ability to produce quality work. In 1988, 84 percent of managers lost staff. Of these, about 79 percent believed that the staff loss had a somewhat or significant negative effect on their offices' operations. In 1986, 74 percent of the managers who lost staff responded in like manner. The increase of 5 percent is not statistically significant.

The following quotes, selected from the responses, provide insight into the managers' views toward performance and quality of service:

Positive Statements

- "More management accountability has been structured and required of managers. Managers have been given encouragement to be more flexible/creative in their managing. 'Take some risks'; this has paid off."
- "During the last 4 years I have practiced and have taught to first-line supervisors hands-on management. All levels of management in the field offices do everything from opening mail, reception work, to monitoring cases."

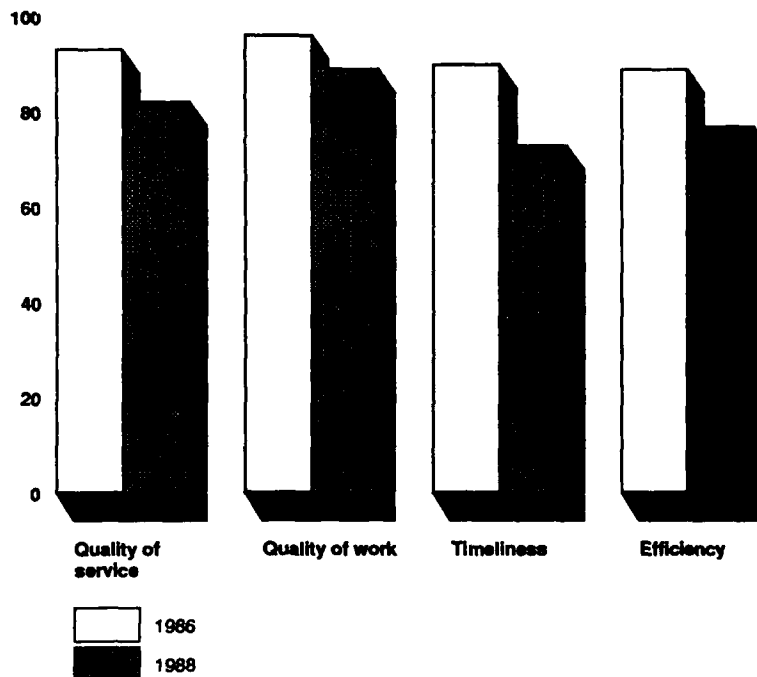
Negative Statements

- "As the staff decreases and the work stays the same, the remaining staff must speed up and this has caused errors through carelessness . . ."
- "Although the targeted workloads are being processed satisfactorily, our service to the public has diminished dramatically and our morale suffers because we can't help the public to the degree that we should and have been used to doing."

Employees

SSA field office employees' perception of the quality of their units' performance is not as positive as in 1986 (see fig. II.2). For example, when employees were asked to describe the adequacy of their units' operations regarding the quality of service, 82 percent called their service to the public adequate or better, down from 93 percent in 1986. The employees also said the quality of their unit's work, timeliness, and efficiency had declined. All of these declines are statistically significant.

Figure II.2: Field Employees' Ratings of Units' Performance as Adequate or Better (1986, 1988)



SSA employees provided examples of their units' performance and/or service. Following are quotes from the responses:

Positive Statements

- "Computer programming provides faster claim processing time . . ."
- "We were constantly backlogged and we are working in [an] organized and better way which helps us to speed our . . . work . . ."
- "[work is better due to] appointments, teleclaims, faster pmt [payment] due to computers."

Negative Statements

- "This office is too concerned with statistics due to pressure from upper SSA management. Time is not taken with the people to make sure they understand the programs. If an item is not needed to meet the agency goals it is left not worked on while the important claims needed to make the statistics are."
- "We have less employees today than we had 3 years ago. We are doing the same or more work. The programs have become much more complex to administer. For example, in the SSI [Supplemental Security Income] program it is very easy to create an overpayment. These are very time-

consuming to work, to explain to the claimant, etc. Many instances these overpayments keep getting larger and larger because of not having enough time or employees to work them. It becomes a vicious circle."

- "The division of work and duties is deficient due to lack of managerial depth and talent. No clear goals or objectives provided by management. For example, the personnel crunch has reduced the number of people in our office. We have not sought new and innovative ways to complete the increased workload that has been passed on to us."

Of the employees who stated in 1988 that their offices lost staff (65 percent), 83 percent believed the staff loss had a somewhat or significant negative effect on their unit's operation. In 1986, only 68 percent of the employees responded in like manner. The increase of 15 percent represents a statistically significant difference.

Views on Unit Morale

Morale in SSA district and branch offices has declined significantly, according to agency personnel. The reasons cited most frequently by managers and employees for the decline were reduction in staff, too much emphasis on performance measurements, and poor promotion potential.

Managers

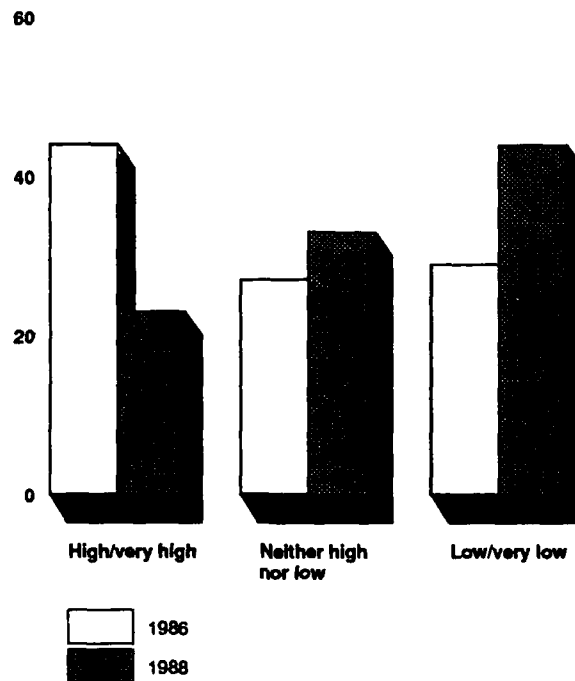
Two years ago, nearly half of the managers believed their employees' morale was high or very high. Now only about a quarter of the managers view their employees as having high or very high morale (see fig. II.3). This decline is statistically significant.

When asked which of 13 suggested reasons for low morale was the most important, the managers most frequently cited a reduction in the number of staff (49 percent) and too much emphasis on performance measurements (18 percent). Reasons cited less frequently included poor promotion potential and uneven workload distribution.

In 1988, we also asked the managers about their own morale. Approximately 30 percent said their morale was high or very high, another 31 percent said it was neither high nor low, about 33 percent said it was low, and 6 percent said that their morale was very low. The most frequent reason given for low morale was staff reductions (35 percent).

Further insight into managers' satisfaction with their jobs resulted when we asked them about selected job elements (see table II.2). The work itself, level of automation, and SSA's mission provided the highest level

Figure II.3: Field Office Managers'
Ratings of Employee Morale (1986, 1988)



of satisfaction for the managers. Conversely, staffing levels, use of management statistics, and upper management's concern for employees were the most significant reasons cited for the managers' dissatisfaction.

Appendix II
Views of Field Office Managers
and Employees

**Table II.2: Managers' Satisfaction With
Selected Job Elements (1988)**

Job element	Level of satisfaction (percent of those responding)		
	Very/generally satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Very/generally dissatisfied
The work itself	91	4	5
Level of automation	82	9	9
SSA's mission	78	13	9
Computer support	75	13	12
Career progression	49	21	30
Amount of training	43	37	21
Pay	43	12	44
Workload	38	32	30
Office morale	29	19	52
Agency direction	27	19	54
Chances for advancement	20	27	54
Staffing level	19	10	71
Upper management concern for employees	17	17	67
Management use of measurement statistics	14	19	66

Employees

SSA's field office employees reported that morale in their units was lower than it was 2 years ago (see fig. II.4). In 1986, for example, 52 percent said that their unit's morale was low or very low compared with 64 percent in 1988—a statistically significant difference.

From a list of 13 the employees were asked to check the major reason for their unit's low morale. Reasons most frequently checked were reductions in staff, too much emphasis on performance measurements, and poor promotion potential. These and others are compared in table II.3 with reasons cited by employees surveyed in 1986 who also said they had low or very low morale.

Appendix II
Views of Field Office Managers
and Employees

Figure II.4: Field Office Employees'
Ratings of Employee Morale (1986, 1988)

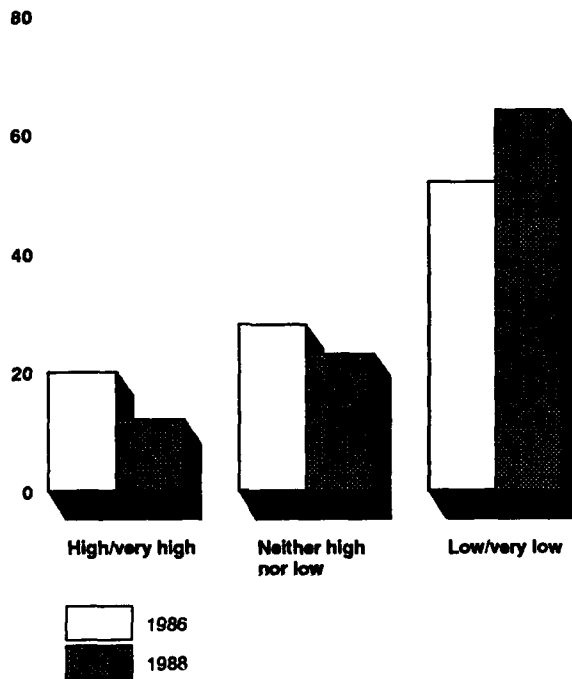


Table II.3: Employees' Reasons for Low
Morale (1986, 1988)

Reason	Percent of respondents citing reason	
	1986	1988
Reduction in number of staff ^a	•	79
Too much emphasis on measurements	60	65
Poor promotion potential	56	56
Lack of stable leadership	31	46
Uneven workload distribution	52	46
Not enough emphasis on employee development	57	42
Expectation of a reduction-in-force	31	37
Necessary training not available	19	32
Poor management in unit	33	32
Poor supervision in unit	34	28
Increasing technological changes	15	25
Uncertainty as to future of unit	16	21
Uncertainty as to future of job	17	18

^aUsed only in 1988 questionnaire.

Appendix II
Views of Field Office Managers
and Employees

When asked how satisfied they were with certain aspects of their job, the employees gave answers similar to those of the managers (see table II.4). For example, the work itself was the most frequent source of satisfaction, and staffing levels, management's concern for employees, and the use of performance measurements were among the causes of the greatest dissatisfaction.

Table II.4: Employees' Satisfaction With Selected Job Elements (1988)

Job element	Percent of respondents citing element		
	Very/generally satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Very/generally dissatisfied
The work itself	81	11	8
Hours worked	80	11	9
Coworkers	76	18	6
Level of automation	72	20	9
SSA's mission	63	25	12
Job classification	58	23	19
Unit management	57	22	21
Pay	48	12	39
Career progression	36	24	40
Agency direction	36	26	39
Management concern for employees	33	22	45
Chances for advancement	25	26	50
Management use of measurement statistics	24	27	49
Staffing level	16	15	69

Views of Area Managers

Generally, SSA's area managers perceived a decline in SSA's service to the public, unit performance, and employee morale over the last 2 years. The area managers' perceptions were similar to those of the field managers.

Quality of Service and Job Performance

SSA area managers reported a significant decline over the last 2 years in their field offices' performance in providing quality service to the public. For example, 33 percent of the area managers responded that their offices' performance was declining, compared with 9 percent in 1986. Overwhelmingly, the reason given by area managers who indicated a decline in performance was a reduction in staff. About 90 percent of the area managers responded that staff reductions had caused a decline in performance to a great or very great extent. The reasons next most frequently indicated were declining morale (67 percent) and revised operating procedures (24 percent).

Asked to rate the extent to which each of 10 problems common in large organizations hindered their ability to accomplish the mission of their offices, area managers called insufficient staff resources to accomplish stated objectives their greatest problem. About 36 percent of the area managers stated that this hindered their ability to manage to a great or very great extent, while 17 percent said it did so to a moderate extent. In 1986, 17 percent of the area managers said insufficient resources hindered their ability to manage to a great or very great extent.

Nearly all area managers indicated they lost staff in fiscal year 1988, and 71 percent believed that the staff loss had a somewhat or significant negative effect on their offices' operations. In 1986, 56 percent of the area managers that lost staff said the loss had a somewhat or significant negative effect.

Staff Morale

According to SSA's area managers, employee morale in their field offices is declining. In 1986, 32 percent of the responding area managers perceived that their offices had a low or very low level of morale. In our 1988 survey, that number increased to 38 percent. When asked the reasons for their offices' low morale, all the area managers responding checked a reduction in staff, followed by poor promotion potential (88 percent) and too much emphasis on performance measurements (75 percent).

Views of Chief Administrative Law Judges and Employees

Quality of Service and Job Performance

The chief ALJs and employees of SSA's Offices of Hearings and Appeals had a positive perception of the quality of their offices' service to the public and job performance. For example, as shown in table IV.1, the number of chief ALJs who viewed their offices' performance as improving rose from 39 percent in 1986 to 51 percent in 1988.

Table IV.1: Offices of Hearings and Appeals: Views of Chief ALJs (1986, 1988)

Office performance	Percent of respondents	
	1986	1988
Improving	39	51
Stable	41	38
Declining	19	11

Chief ALJs who perceived their office's performance as improving or stable (89 percent) rated several key factors as having a positive effect on performance. The most frequently cited reasons affecting performance to a great or very great extent were: improved management controls (40 percent), automation (33 percent), better staff morale (32 percent), and increased staff (27 percent). About 64 percent of the chief ALJs responding to our questionnaire stated that either their staffing level increased (32 percent) or remained the same (32 percent).

Employees of the Office of Hearings and Appeals also had a positive view of their work. Of employees responding to our survey, 87 percent stated that the quality of their work was good to very good.¹

Morale

Unlike their counterparts in the SSA field offices, the chief ALJs in the Hearings and Appeals offices did not perceive a decline in morale in their offices. At the same time, however, in 1988 the employees view their morale much lower than perceived by the chief ALJs (see table IV.2).

Table IV.2: Morale in the Offices of Hearings and Appeals: Views of Chief ALJs and Employees (1986, 1988)

Morale level	Chief ALJs 1986	Chief ALJs 1988	Employees 1988
Generally high or very high	47	48	18
Neither high nor low	32	32	26
Generally low or very low	22	21	55

¹ Hearings assistants and clerks were not stratified separately in the 1986 survey and were reported with other employee groups.

**Appendix IV
Views of Chief Administrative Law Judges
and Employees**

Both the chief ALJs and the employees were in agreement that the major morale problem in the Hearings and Appeals offices was a lack of promotion potential (see table IV.3). In some areas, the chief ALJs' reasons for their units' low morale were significantly different than the reasons cited by their employees. For example, there was a significant difference in the perceived effect of poor management on morale.

**Table IV.3: Reasons for Low Unit Morale:
Views of Chief ALJs and Employees
(1988)**

Reason	Percentage of those citing reason	
	Chief ALJs	Employees
Poor promotion potential	74	80
Uneven workload distribution	47	61
Poor management in unit	5	58
Not enough emphasis on employee development	68	57
Too much emphasis on measurements	68	54
Necessary training not available	47	43
Poor supervision in unit	11	42
Lack of stable leadership	47	41
Reduction in number of staff	42	38
Uncertainty as to future of unit	16	13
Expectation of a reduction-in-force	11	7
Increasing technological changes	21	7
Uncertainty as to future of job	16	6

Quality of Specific Services

When asked about the quality of specific services, field office managers and employees and area managers generally were positive about their units' performance (see table V.1). Likewise, in hearing offices chief ALJs and employees were positive about the services they provided with one exception—timeliness in processing decisions.

Table V.1: Quality of Services: Views of Field Office Managers and Employees (1988)

Service	Quality of service (percent of those rating)							
	Good/very good		Fair		Poor/very poor		Does not apply	
	Mngrs	Emps	Mngrs	Emps	Mngrs	Emps	Mngrs	Emps
Courtesy toward clients	92	80	7	15	2	5	0	0
Thoroughness of developing evidence for initial claims	86	74	12	17	3	2	0	8
Program explanations given to clients	80	64	17	26	3	9	1	1
Client waiting time	74	51	20	27	6	22	0	0
Handling clients' concerns over the telephone	73	56	21	29	7	15	0	0
Locating potential clients	72	68	20	20	8	10	0	3
Timeliness in processing ALJ decisions	64	46	26	22	9	11	1	20
Quality of notices sent to clients	59	49	35	29	7	19	0	3
Clients' access to SSA offices by telephone	55	49	30	24	15	26	0	1
Timeliness in postentitlement processing	51	41	30	28	20	27	0	4
Public information regarding SSA activities	46	50	33	26	19	13	2	11

The salient points of the data are:

- The employees have a generally lower perception of service quality than do the managers.
- Three of the five highest ranked services involve direct contact between employees and their clients, while the types of services receiving less positive ratings tend to be concerned indirectly with the clients and more with the operations of the office.
- The three types of services rated lowest by the managers and employees were (1) access to SSA field offices by telephone, (2) timeliness of post-entitlement processing, and (3) public information activities.

Where services were rated poor or very poor, we asked the respondents to evaluate the extent to which certain factors—e.g., computer system

problems, inadequate training, and inadequate policies and procedures—contributed to the poor rating. The factors seen as contributing the most were lack of staff, poor morale, and workload pressures.

Area managers' views on specific services were basically the same as the field managers'. About 89 percent of the area managers viewed SSA's courtesy toward clients as good to very good, 83 percent saw SSA's thoroughness of developing evidence for initial claims as good to very good, and 75 percent perceived SSA's program explanations given to clients as good to very good. The lowest rated services as perceived by the area managers were (1) timeliness of postentitlement processing (13 percent rated it as poor or very poor), and (2) access to SSA field offices by telephone (9 percent rated it poor or very poor). The major reason given for the poor rating was a lack of staff.

The chief ALJs and employees working in field Hearings and Appeals offices have a more limited exposure to clients than do the field office personnel. We thus asked respondents in these offices to rate the quality of service to the public pertaining only to the specific service aspects of their offices. In just one specific service area did the employees and, to a lesser extent the chief ALJs, perceive a problem: timeliness in processing work related to ALJ decisions. Of those responding, 22 percent of the employees and 13 percent of the chief ALJs rated this area as poor or very poor. As major reasons for the poor ratings, employees cited workload pressures, low morale, and insufficient staff; chief ALJs cited insufficient staff and workload pressures.

SSA Initiatives to Improve Quality of Service

To improve public service, SSA now uses appointments to schedule field office visits and is taking claims over the telephone (teleclaims). In our questionnaire, we asked the field office managers and employees several questions regarding the use of appointments and teleclaims—specifically: (1) what percentage of the time they are used and (2) their effect on their offices' operations and service to the public.

Appointments

In 1986, the SSA Commissioner emphasized the need for field offices to increase their scheduling of interviews by appointment. This initiative was designed to improve service for clients and enable SSA to manage its walk-in traffic. The use of appointments has been well received by field office personnel, our analysis showed, but their use among offices varies considerably. Both employees and managers rated the appointment system highly when asked about its effects on convenience to the public, planning and scheduling work, and reducing client waiting time (see table VI.1).

Table VI.1: Effect of Appointments on Service: Views of Employees and Managers (1988)

Service/work aspect	Effect on service (percent of those rating)					
	Significantly or somewhat positive		Neither positive nor negative		Significantly or somewhat negative	
	Employees	Managers	Employees	Managers	Employees	Managers
Convenience to the public	84	82	10	12	6	6
Client waiting time	75	74	15	18	10	8
Planning and scheduling work	71	78	20	15	9	6
Reducing face-to-face visits	59	64	33	32	8	4
Timely claims processing	52	54	39	38	9	8

Judging by managers' and employees' estimates, the use of appointments varies widely among SSA field offices. (See table VI.2). On average, field offices use appointments about 43 percent of the time.

Table VI.2: Use of Appointments in Field Offices (1988)

Frequency of use (percent)	Percent citing use of appointments	
	Managers	Employees
0-20	33	35
21-40	21	18
41-60	20	18
61-80	18	14
81-100	8	16

Teleclaims

In an April 1988 report to SSA employees, the SSA commissioner stated: "... the initiatives that have had—and will continue to have—the greatest impact on our goal to improve service are the actions we are taking to increase the public's use of the telephone to do their business with us. Nationwide, teleclaims rates that hovered around 20 [percent] a year ago are now nearing 40 [percent]."

As with appointments, teleclaims have been well received in SSA field offices, but their use varies widely. Both employees and managers generally gave teleclaims positive ratings with regard to the key aspects of work and service to the public on which they were questioned (see table VI.3).

Table VI.3: Effect of Teleclaims on Service: Views of Managers and Employees (1988)

Service/work aspect	Effect on service (percent of those rating)					
	Significantly or somewhat positive		Neither positive nor negative		Significantly or somewhat negative	
	Employees	Managers	Employees	Managers	Employees	Managers
Convenience to the public	92	93	5	4	4	4
Reducing face-to-face visits	85	91	8	6	7	3
Client waiting time	77	78	15	16	9	6
Planning and scheduling work	71	79	18	15	11	6
Timely claims processing	54	62	30	24	16	14

The use of teleclaims has varied widely among the field offices included in our questionnaire, table VI.4 shows. According to managers' and employees' estimates of the use of teleclaims, field offices take on average about 47 percent of claims over the telephone.

Table VI.4: Use of Teleclaims in Field Offices (1988)

Frequency of use (percent)	Percent citing use of teleclaims	
	Managers	Employees
0-20	8	10
21-40	35	33
41-60	45	38
61-80	9	14
81-100	2	5

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